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Item 10 (a) of the provisional agenda*

NATURAL DISASTER REDUCTION: VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES

Technical session

Addendum

Community vulnerability and local knowledge

Summary of presentation by the Japanese Red Cross, in collaboration with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies

1. With a quarter of a billion people affected by disasters each year and some 10 million more joining their numbers annually, disaster response has little chance of becoming a dying industry. Globally, natural disasters kill around 150,000 people a year. So, whilst disaster reduction must be about preventing these deaths, it must also be about preventing the ongoing suffering of those who are tragically affected by disaster. In Africa over 10 million and in Asia over 100 million a year. This means tackling underlying causes of vulnerability.

2. One of the most underrated tools available in disaster reduction is local knowledge. Knowledge which has been built up over generations by families and communities which regularly have to face the consequences of disasters, because the reality of natural disasters is that they are repetitive. Floods occur regularly in Bangladesh, drought is an ever-present threat in the Horn of Africa and earthquakes seem to hit the Islamic Republic of Iran every other year. Gearing disaster preparedness and mitigation assistance so that it builds upon local knowledge and organization is a strategy much more likely to achieve success than is creating technically beautiful programmes in glorious isolation.

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3. The presentation examines the nature of local knowledge, showing it to be neither static nor all empowering, but rather an evolving resource which must be understood and used in partnership with external knowledge.

4. The role of local knowledge in disaster prevention is examined through case-studies of a soil and water conservation project in the Yatanga region of Burkina Faso and of an earthquake response programme in Ecuador, where many builders have started to re-evaluate traditional styles of building following the 1987 earthquake.

5. Local knowledge in disaster relief is examined through the experience of farmers in drought-prone areas of Rajasthan who manage their economy in such a way as to offset the impact of drought years by the use of assets gained during good years, and through similar experiences of farmers in Bangladesh.

6. The consequences of not understanding and working with local knowledge are illustrated by the unfortunate consequences of using imported sorghum in Africa to alleviate famine conditions, and using inappropriate rehousing techniques in Bangladesh following the 1988-1989 floods.

7. Building on this knowledge, suggestions are made as to how scientific institutions can work more closely with the holders of local knowledge and incorporate it into scientific experience.

8. In conclusion, the paper advocates a strong partnership approach to disaster response which recognizes the advantage to be gained by combining both external scientific and local knowledge to reduce disaster vulnerability.